

# **Soul Beneficiary**

An Honors Thesis (TCOM 495)

By

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Abstract: "Soul Beneficiary" is a project written by English student Adam Gulla and produced by the Telecommunications department at Ball State. I directed the film from spring of 2014 to final completion of the project in May of 2015. The final film is just over one half hour in length. The film tells the story of Claire, a young woman who is named the beneficiary after an elderly neighbor has passes away. Fighting her own personal demons from a traumatic past, Claire soon recognizes that she has a new demon to worry about. The elderly lady's spirit is now attempting to posses her, and she must race against time to find a to stop the process that is making her lose all sense of self and reality.

Acknowledgements: I'd like to thank all of the cast and crew that worked so hard over four semesters to make this project happen. I'd also like to thank Sonny Wingle, who volunteered to teach us for a couple of days and never got paid, and Rich Swingle, without whom the summer film would not exist. The amount of work he does for this is incredibly underappreciated.

Up to this point, I have been involved in a number of short films in an assortment of roles, but until recently I had never been in charge of a film of this scale or complexity. Over the course of the past year, I directed the short film “Soul Beneficiary.” We began pre-production in March of 2014 with the goal of having the movie finished by May of 2015. I completed video post-production in January of 2015 and handed the project off to the audio team, who finished post-production in May of 2015.

When I first got involved with this film in 2014, I was not the director. The way the pre-production class works is that it is actually an advanced video production class that happens to double for pre-production for the summer film. As such, I produced two other short independent films in that class before we got the script for the summer. Every year the Telecommunications department produces a film during the summer. Rich Swingley, a professor in the department, heads the project. In the summer of 2013, I worked on the lighting and camera crew for the summer film at the time. That is where I heard about the pre-production class.

We first saw the script for “Soul Beneficiary” probably in March, and began working as a group to give feedback to the writer, a student in the English department. There were four of us in the class, but the system was not the most efficient. Essentially we gave our feedback to Rich, who then took it to Matt Mullins, a professor in the English department, who relayed it to the writer. We went through five or six versions of the script this way, focusing primarily on character development and plot. Some of my primary complaints about the early versions of the script included weaknesses of two of the primary characters, and the ending scene. One character in particular served very little

purpose in the first versions of the script, and the original ending used a very inactive protagonist.

As the script became more refined, we began to search for locations to use for filming. We were searching for two houses and an office. In the script the houses are across the street, but we decided that it would be easier to fake that than to find two houses that were actually across the street from one another. The office we determined could be somewhere on campus. There are quite a few factors to consider when looking for a location to shoot. Primarily, the look of the place. We needed one house to look like



One of our potential locations.

a college professor's place, and the other to be the home of a possessive witch. In terms of logistics, accessibility, parking, storm shelter, medical facilities, and restrooms are all considerations. On the video side, windows play an important role.

Not only how many and what size, but also what side of the house they are on. East facing windows are going to give more light in the morning, for example, which can be important in scheduling. Then power is always an issue. Particularly in older houses, grounded outlets can be hard to find. And when we are using 1200 watt lights, we need grounded outlets. Ceiling height is also a factor, and it is always good to have an indoor staging area for equipment. For audio, we had to consider creaky floors, noisy neighbors, nearby train tracks or construction or busy roads, refrigerators, air conditioners, and

anything else that might make unwanted noise. It is incredible what a good boom microphone will pick up.

Toward the end of the spring semester in 2014, the call went out for the summer crew, the people who would actually shoot the movie. It was at this time that I applied for, and got, the job of director. Pre-production continued for the first few weeks of the summer, as we prepared to shoot. Casting was one of the biggest challenges. We needed five actors, two college age girls, two college age guys, and an elderly woman. Since we did not have a budget to pay the actors, and we could not even promise them class credit like the crew, it was very difficult to get volunteers. We ended up with just enough people to do the film. After we locked down the locations and actors, I worked with the art director to establish the set design and wardrobe for each location and character. At the same time, I had been handed the script for further revision, and we talked through a couple of drafts as a crew. I was also working with the producer and assistant director to schedule the shoots, and the director of photography to determine the cinematic style. One consideration was the type of camera to use. On the previous summer film, we had used the Sony EX3, but for this film we were considering using the Canon 5D. The 5D shoots better quality video, and allows more creative control. However, it is a DSLR, which uses a rolling shutter. This means that the frame is not captured all at once, but rather from top to bottom. It only takes a fraction of a second, but in high motion situations this can cause the bottom of the image to tear some. There was also no established way to use the 5D with monitors, meaning we would potentially only be able to use the viewfinder on the camera, which is rather small. We managed to find solutions to both of those issues. I personally prefer the look of the 5D, and since the director of

photography was more experienced with DSLRs than the EX3, we decided to shoot on the 5D.

We began principle photography on June 4. I was commuting from Indianapolis, so I would have an hour drive before we started work. More than a few times I would be dealing with issues by phone as I went. The first problems of the day are usually weather, location, or cast related. We did not have any issues with rain when we were shooting outdoor scenes, but the weather can affect indoor scenes as well. To help boost the existing daylight, we would often put lights outside the window. Naturally they can't be out there in the rain, so if the weather was bad we had to get creative. One solution is to mount an umbrella above the light to protect it. At our second location we were able to put the light on the porch and bounce it off of a reflector and through the window to light the scene. Cast issues were generally related to work. Everyone on the cast and crew was working another job, and since we were not able to pay our actors, we could not exactly convince them to turn down a paid gig to work for us. As a result, our main actress took a paid job and was unavailable for a week. Her character is in essentially every scene in the film, so we had to figure out what little we could shoot without her to keep the momentum going so we would be done on time. Location problems are usually the worst. We can deal with weather, and shoot around missing cast members, but if we do not have anywhere to shoot, there is not much we can do. We had two big issues with locations. The first was with the room we were using for the witch's bedroom. We were maybe halfway through shooting the scenes in that room when we found out that the owner was leaving for France and locking her door. I heard about this maybe Thursday (we would shoot Monday-Thursday) and she was leaving on Tuesday. This was also the week before

we lost our main actress to her paid job, so there was no way we could shoot Monday. It was either shoot the last scenes there over the weekend, or find



a new location and reshoot everything. Fortunately, we

The witch's bedroom. Every day we had to box up the owner's stuff and move it out, decorate it like this, shoot, and then move her stuff back exactly the way it was. The art director and production manager deserve a lot of credit for pulling that off.

managed to pull together an emergency volunteer crew and work a long day that Sunday to get everything done. The other issue was with the other bedroom we were using. One day as I walked in to the office where we were keeping our equipment, I found out that the producer had just gotten a call from the owner saying she was sick and would we be able to come in at eleven instead of nine. Of course, we do not really have a choice in that situation, but I also did not want to sit around for two hours. So the assistant director and I looked at the schedule and found a scene we had left to shoot on campus. It was a night scene scheduled for the next week, but it was short and we blacked out the windows and got it done. Every day was a different adventure.

Directing is a very delicate balancing act, the most difficult part of which is probably balancing time and quality. Creativity takes time, but we also had a schedule to keep. Efficiency is really key to filmmaking. I had to exist simultaneously in the past, present, and future. I had to consider what we shot two weeks ago, and how that scene would flow into the one we were currently shooting, what we shot two minutes ago and how that shot would work with the next one, would the lighting match, or the performance and the camera angle. I had to think about what we were shooting, lighting,



camera, performance, audio. And then I had to think about the next shot, and how this one would flow into that, what we were shooting two weeks later, and how this scene would work with that one, and also how it would be edited two months later, particularly with visual effects.

I was editing rough versions of everything as we went along, to help with this process. With modern technology, I could shoot something, go home, edit it together, and export it to my phone so I could look at it on set the next day. This helped immensely with continuity when we were shooting consecutive scenes weeks apart.

When it came time for final post-production in the fall of 2014, a class of students was editing the film. Of that class of fifteen or twenty people, four were from the summer crew. I was attached to the class as an independent study, so I worked with each of the groups in determining how the film would look. I also had the job of doing a master edit at the end to ensure consistency between all the sections of the film. My primary job during this period though, was dealing with the visual effects for the film. I had a range of visual effects to do, some planned, some unplanned. These ranged from replacing the screens of cell phones to digitally layering shots to create the illusion that the houses were across the street rather than miles apart. I also dealt with creating muzzle flashes and the final witch effect, as well as a disappearing effect for the protagonist's haunting father. These had to be carefully planned during



Muzzle flash with the witch behind.

shooting to match everything up, but not everything was planned. I also dealt with fixing

some small lighting issues, cleaning up shadows or bright spots in a couple of places.

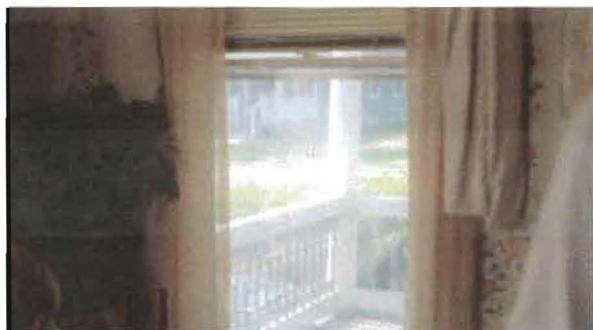
One of the more difficult shots I had to fix in post-production was part of a location problem. On our last day of shooting in the witch's bedroom, we had a shot that was out of focus. Since we could not reshoot, I had to fix it. The problem was a mirror that played a large role in the story. I took some still photos of the mirror, and layered them over the shot to create the effect.



Phone screen replacement. The raw shot on the left, the final composite on the right.



The mirror shot. The original shot on the left, the final composite on the right. The trickiest part was matching the camera movement.



One of the window shots. The left is the actual view through the window, the right is replaced with the house from miles away. On a smaller note, I also had to digitally replace the flame on the candle since we forgot to light it for this shot.

Once the video was finalized, I handed it off to Rich Swingley for his audio class to polish the film in the spring of 2015. There were some audio effects that I helped write, but other than that I did not have a large role in this part of the process. It is incredible what a difference the polished audio makes though. Having good audio makes the video look even better. Just another example of how every aspect of the project has to succeed for the project as a whole to succeed.

There is no better way to learn how to make a movie than to actually make a movie. It is impossible to teach all of the little things that go into pulling off a film in the classroom. This type of immersive project is the best way to gain that experience. I learned an incredible amount not only about directing, but about every part of the filmmaking process through the production of this film. As a graduating senior, I cannot wait to carry this experience into the professional world.